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ABSTRACT

Sports programming plays a significant role in the media messages that American boys receive today. To explore the messages that sports programming presents to its audience, this report relates the findings of a study that analyzed a representative selection of sports programs and their accompanying commercials; also presented are findings from a national poll of 1,200 children ages 10-17 and 2 focus groups of boys. Part 1 of the report, "Analyzing Sports Programming," discusses aggression, violence, and injuries as well as sports, race, and gender. Key findings include: (1) aggression and violence among men is depicted as exciting and rewarding behavior; (2) athletes who play with pain are often portrayed as heroes; (3) games are often promoted by creating or inflating conflict between two star athletes; (4) white males dominate the world of sports commentary; (5) while there were few overtly racist images or comments, sports programs occasionally reinforce racial stereotypes; and (6) women are largely absent from the sports programs that boys watch, and when they do appear, they are portrayed in stereotypical ways. Part 2 of the report, "Analyzing Commercials in Sports Programming," discusses products and commercial sponsorships and tie-ins. Key findings include: (1) the primary products advertised are automobiles, shows on the same network, and snacks or fast food; (2) while male athletes of color play prominent roles in sports programming, people of color in general are underrepresented in the commercials; (3) women often appear in stereotypical or background roles in commercials; and (4) traditionally masculine images of speed, danger, and aggression are often used in the sports programming commercials. (LPP)

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boys to MEN

SPORTS MEDIA

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Messages About Masculinity

A national poll of children, focus groups, and content analysis of sports programs and commercials.

CHILDREN NOW

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Children Now is a nonpartisan, independent voice for America's children. Using innovative research and communications strategies, Children Now promotes pioneering solutions to problems facing America's children. Recognized nationally for its policy expertise, up-to-date information on the status of children, and leading work with the media, Children Now focuses particular attention on the needs of children who are poor or at risk, while working to improve conditions for all children by making them a top priority across the nation.

The **Children & the Media Program** works to improve the quality of news and entertainment media for children and about children's issues. We seek to accomplish that goal through independent research, public policy development, and outreach to leaders in the media industry.

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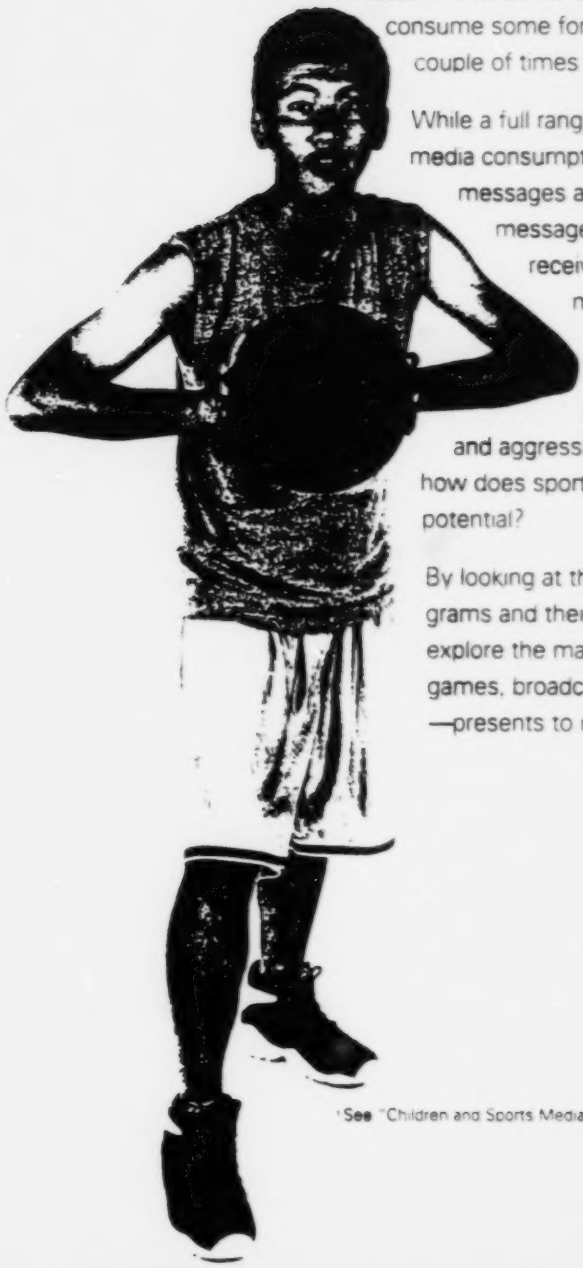
Introduction



Sports programming plays a significant role in the media messages that American boys receive today. According to a recent study conducted by the Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles, 98% of U.S. boys ages 8 to 17 consume some form of sports-related media, 82% do so at least a couple of times a week, and 90% watch televised sports.[1]

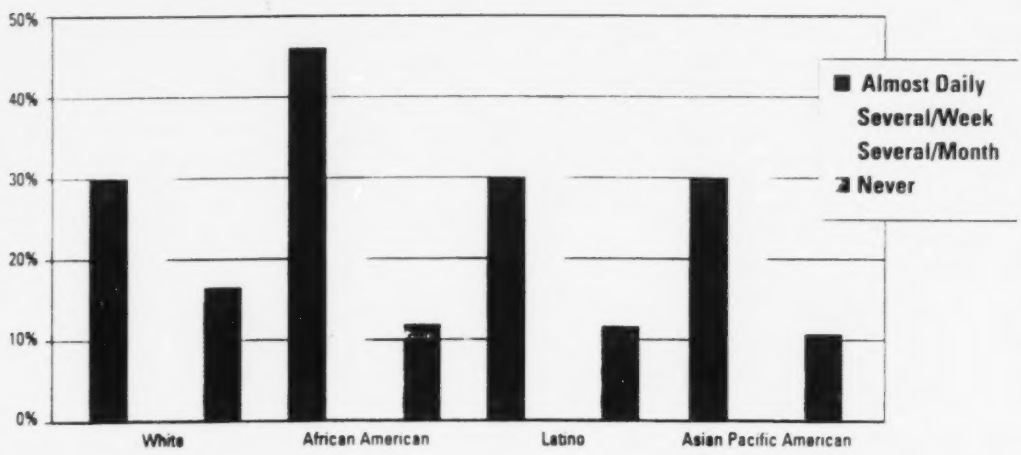
While a full range of American boys watch sports, the effects of their media consumption may differ depending on who they are and what messages are being sent. Do boys of color receive the same messages from these programs that White boys do? Do girls receive the same messages that boys do? What roles do men and women play in the games, on the sidelines or during the commercial breaks? Who are the coaches, the commentators, and the voices of authority on these sports shows? How are violence and aggression presented in sports programming? Above all, how does sports programming affect a boy's sense of self and his potential?

By looking at the quality of a representative selection of sports programs and their accompanying commercials, Children Now begins to explore the many messages that sports programming—athletes, games, broadcast networks, commentators, promoters, commercials—presents to its audience.

[1] See "Children and Sports Media," Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles (August 1999)

Boys are five times more likely than girls to watch sports programs on a regular basis. On average, one out of three boys across all races watch every day. With its fundamentally male "cast"—athletes and anchors, coaches and commentators—sports programming sends uniquely powerful messages about masculine behavior.

Frequency of Boys' Sports Viewing by Race (1999)



Aggression, Violence & Injuries

Aggression and violence among men is depicted as exciting and rewarding behavior.

One of sports coverage's dominant messages is that the most aggressive athletes are rewarded. Viewers are continually immersed in images that highlight and commentary that praises athletes who most successfully employ physical, aggressive play, as well as toughness.

This message was found most often in NBA games, comprising 40 of the 66 examples from our sample. For example, on *SportsCenter*, after having his toughness called into question, NBA player Brian Grant was awarded redemption by a commentator because he showed that he was "not afraid to take it to Karl Malone."

During the NFL games, there were 15 examples of this message, as commentators enthusiastically described and replayed scenes of players who got "buried," "stuffed," or "walloped" by the defense, or "cleaned out" or "wiped" by the blocker. There also were several instances of this theme during Extreme Sports (4 times), Major League Baseball games (4 times), and *SportsCenter* (3 times).

"That makes me laugh when people get knocked out. That is funny."

Sports coverage emphasizes the notion that violence is to be expected. Fights, near-fights, threats of fights or other violent actions are found in sports coverage and often verbally framed in sarcastic language that suggests that this kind of action is acceptable. This message was found most frequently on *SportsCenter* (10 times), followed by the NFL games (7 times), Major League Baseball games (2 times), NBA games (2 times), and Extreme Sports (1 time).

For example, when *SportsCenter* showed two NBA players exchanging forearm shoves, the commentators reported that they were showing "much love." And in an NFL game, a broadcaster described a brief scuffle between players, explaining that they were simply "making their acquaintance."

Athletes who are "playing with pain" or "giving up their body for the team" are often portrayed as heroes. Commentators laud athletes who engage in dangerous plays or compete while injured; conversely, they sometimes criticize athletes who remove themselves from games due to injuries, often raising questions about their manhood. For example, a *SportsCenter* commentator asked, "Could the Dominator be soft?" when an NHL goalie decided to sit out a game due to a groin injury.

This "playing with pain" theme was most common in the NFL games (15 instances), followed by Extreme Sports (12 instances), *SportsCenter* (9 instances), and NBA games (6 instances). For example, during an NFL game, a commentator noted, "Drew Bledsoe gamely tried to play in a loss to the Rams yesterday. It was really admirable to try to play with that pin that was surgically implanted in his finger during the week. I don't know how a quarterback could do that... and [he] really elevated himself in my eyes, he really did." And on NBC, NBA player Isaiah Rider was lauded as having "heart" for "playing with that knee injury."

Commentators consistently use martial metaphors and language of war and weaponry to describe sports action. On an average of nearly five times per hour of sports commentary, announcers describe action using terms such as "battle," "kill," "ammunition," "weapons," "professional sniper," "taking aim," "fighting," "shot in his arsenal," "reloading," "detonate," "squeezes the trigger," "exploded," "attack mode," "firing blanks," "blast," "explosion," "blitz," "point of attack," "lance through the heart," "gunning it," "battle lines are drawn," and "shotgun."

These war references were used most often in NBA games (27 times), followed by NFL games (23 times), Wrestling (15 times), *SportsCenter* (9 times), Major League Baseball games (6 times), and Extreme Sports (3 times).

Pro Wrestling

- **Professional Wrestling is the whole package.** Professional Wrestling is not a "sport" in the way that baseball, basketball, football or even Extreme Sports are. It is a highly stylized and choreographed "sport as theatre" form of entertainment. The shows' producers have condensed and then amplified all of the themes of violence and aggression found in the more conventional televised sports. Violence, rather than representing a "thread" in the commentary (as it does in football or basketball broadcasts), is the entire fabric of the theatrical narrative.

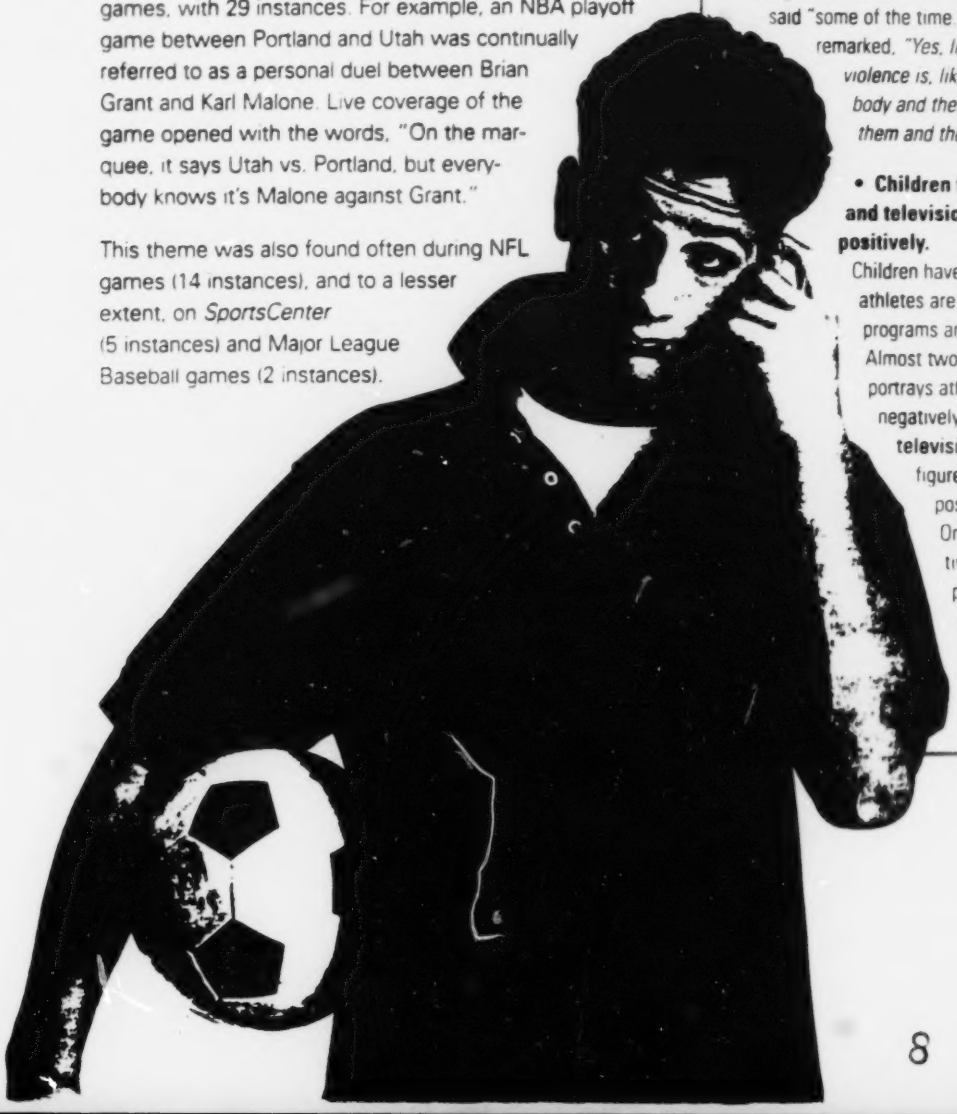
  Winners bravely display muscular strength, speed, power, and guts in the face of danger and injury. Bodily harm is (supposedly) intentionally inflicted upon opponents. The most ruthlessly aggressive men win, while the passive or weaker men lose, often shamefully. Wrestling while injured, rehabilitating one's self from former injuries, and inflicting pain and injury upon one's opponent are central themes. And finally, the commentators' narrative consists of descriptions of current fights being depicted inside or outside the ring.

Sports commentators continually depict and replay incidents of athletes taking big hits and engaging in reckless acts of speed and violent crashes. Showing guts in the face of danger and disaster is a common theme among sports programs and is especially prominent in Extreme Sports, appearing 21 different times during the sample week. For example, ESPN promoted its road racing show as a "rip-roaring weekend of macho mania – a wild and reckless road trip." And when competitors took great risks, sports commentators excitedly described them as "on fire" and "going huge."

This "show some guts" theme was also found in NFL games (8 instances), NBA games (5 instances), *SportsCenter* (4 instances), and Major League Baseball games (2 instances).

Games are often promoted by creating or inflating conflict between two star athletes. Sports announcers often frame team games as individual one-on-one contests between two well-known individual players. This theme was particularly prominent in the NBA games, with 29 instances. For example, an NBA playoff game between Portland and Utah was continually referred to as a personal duel between Brian Grant and Karl Malone. Live coverage of the game opened with the words, "On the marquee, it says Utah vs. Portland, but everybody knows it's Malone against Grant."

This theme was also found often during NFL games (14 instances), and to a lesser extent, on *SportsCenter* (5 instances) and Major League Baseball games (2 instances).



Kids Poll

- **More than half of the children in our poll (57%) said they see violence in sports programs often.** When asked how often they see violence on sports programs, 15% said "a lot of the time" and 42% said "some of the time." As one 12 year-old boy remarked, *"Yes, like in the sports games, the violence is, like, normal. They grab somebody and then just throw them or push them and they fall."*

- **Children think that both television and television news portray athletes positively.** Children have a favorable view of how athletes are portrayed in both sports programs and sports news coverage. Almost two-thirds said that **television** portrays athletes more positively than negatively; similarly, 59% said that **television news** portrays sports figures they look up to more positively than negatively. Only 15% and 12% respectively describe television programs and television news as portraying athletes more negatively than positively.

Sports, Race & Gender

White males dominate the world of sports commentary.
The voices of authority on the sports shows surveyed are almost exclusively those of White males. More than three-fourths of sports announcers in the sample are White males (77%) who conduct the "play-by-play," ongoing "color commentary" in the NFL, NBA, and Major League Baseball games, as well as on *SportsCenter*, in Wrestling, and in Extreme Sports.

Women and people of color are presented sparingly and, with the exception of ESPN's use of a woman and an African American male co-anchor, play minor supporting roles. In this sample, they rarely appear as the main voices of authority – "in the booth," conducting "play-by-play" or providing ongoing "color commentary." White females and African American males each account for only 10% of sports commentators; African American females account for only 3% of announcers. For example, the NFL broadcasts occasionally cut to a White woman for field-level color commentary, but her reporting was very brief (about three and a half minutes of the nearly three hours of actual game and pre-game commentary). Further, there were no Latino or Asian Pacific American sports commentators in our sample of sports shows.

While there were few overtly racist images or comments, sports programs occasionally reinforced racial stereotypes or called attention to race/ethnicity in commentary.
Racial stereotypes or comments were found during the NBA and NFL games (7 and 6 instances, respectively), followed by *SportsCenter* (3 instances), Wrestling (3 instances), and Extreme Sports (1 instance). For example, twice on *SportsCenter*, announcers broke into an exaggerated Spanish accent to announce a Latino baseball player's home run. Further, *SportsCenter* commentators have lauded African American athletes for their "natural athleticism." And finally, during the staged Wrestling shows in our sample, Latino, Asian, and other non-White wrestlers never won the matches.

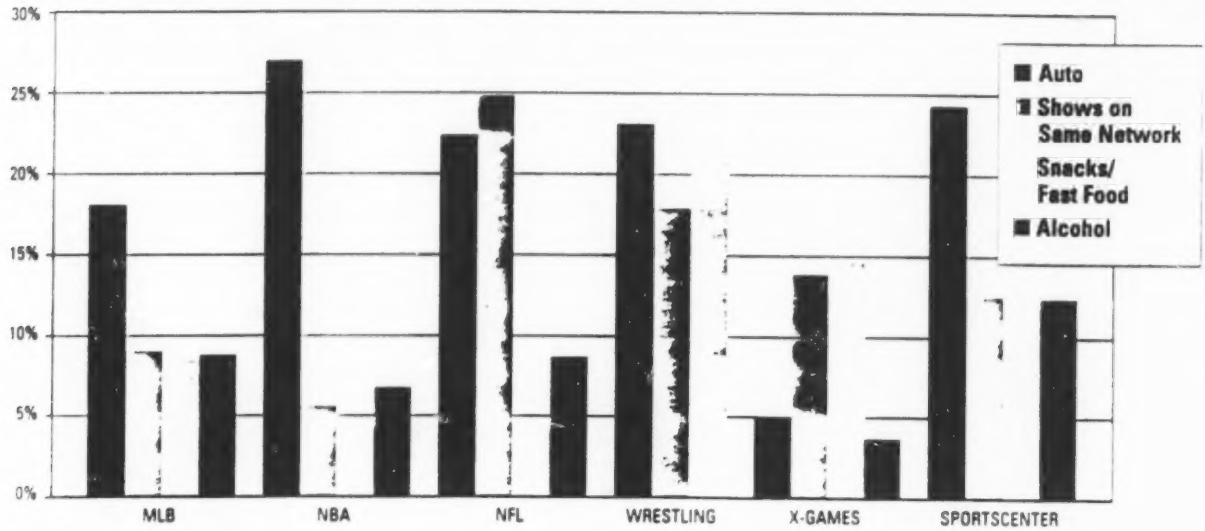
Women athletes receive very little coverage on sports programs that supposedly feature both men and women athletes.
While we would not expect to see women athletes in male sports programs such as the NFL, NBA, and Major League Baseball games or Wrestling, we would expect to see them on *SportsCenter* and Extreme Sports. Surprisingly, ESPN's *SportsCenter* shows in our sample devote a mere 3% of news time to women's sports. Even Extreme Sports programming that is seen as an "alternative" open to men and women devotes only 1% of its coverage to women athletes.

Women are largely absent from the sports programs that boys watch and when they do appear, they are portrayed in stereotypical ways.
The lack of women in male-dominated sports programs gives their rare appearances greater significance. For the most part, women appear in sports programs as sex objects, supportive spouses, or spectators on the sidelines, cheering the men on. The incidence of women being used as sex objects or props was most common in Wrestling (13 times), followed by Extreme Sports (5 times), NFL games (4 times), and the NBA (3 times). In Wrestling, for example, the shows utilized scantily clad women to escort the male wrestlers to the ring, often with announcers discussing their "feminine virtues." In the NBA and NFL games, cameras cut to close-up shots of the cheerleaders, often focusing on their breasts.

Part II: Analyzing Commercials in Sports Programming

The $1.6 million price tag for a 30-second spot during Super Bowl XXXIII . . . Nike's ubiquitous "Just Do It" ads featuring Michael Jordan . . . Mountain Dew sponsorship banners hanging around the X-Games' ramps. Whether it is TV commercial time, celebrity endorsement or tournament sponsorship, advertising plays an integral role in professional sports and a significant part of the messages that all young people receive from watching sports programming. Almost one quarter of the sample consisted of commercials (722 in total), sr 'ing products that ranged from automobiles and alcohol to fast food and video games. What do these engaging images and catchy phrases tell kids about sports, media, and themselves? What overall messages are boys getting from the sports shows that they watch the most, including the commercials?

Top Products Advertised During Sports Programs (1999)



Products

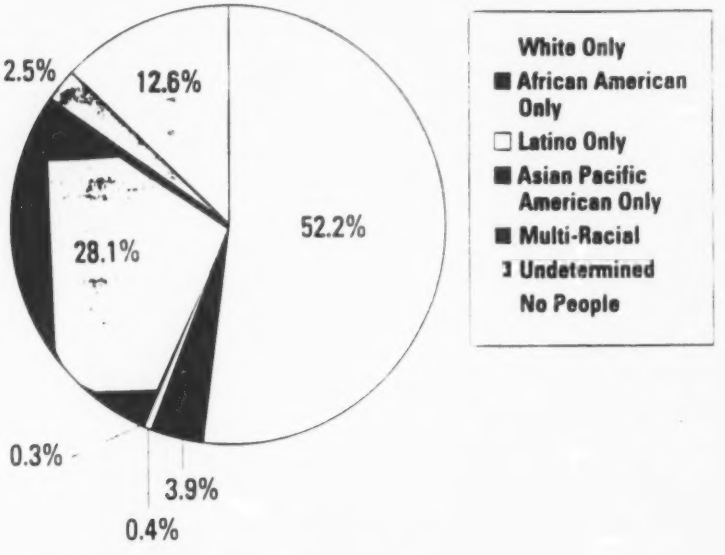
- **Automobiles, shows on the same network, and snacks/fast food are the primary products advertised on the sports programs that boys watch.** Automobile-related ads represented the largest proportion of recorded advertising across all programs (20.5% overall) and were the highest percentage of commercials for each sports program except Extreme Sports and the NFL. Following closely were ads for other shows on the same network (14.1% overall) and snack/fast food commercials (11% overall). Notably, alcohol advertisements were a significant proportion of commercials for all sports programs, except Extreme Sports and Wrestling.

Commercial Sponsorships & Tie-Ins

Sports programming reveals a powerful commercial alliance between celebrity athletes, corporations, and the broadcasting network. For example, ESPN *SportsCenter*'s "Breakdown" segment features baseball superstar Mark McGwire buying another player a Big Mac for pitches that McGwire hit into "Big Mac Land." Banners and corporate ads are visible throughout most Major League Baseball broadcasts. NBA stats and player profiles during game commentary are usually "brought to you by" a named corporate sponsor. Further, brand name manufacturers of equipment used in the games are often highlighted by commercials during the event and by broadcast logos shown in opening program shots.

Race

Racial Composition of Sports Programming Commercials (1999)



While some male athletes of color do play prominent roles in sports programming, people of color in general are underrepresented in the sports programming commercials that boys watch and appear primarily in stereotypical and/or background roles.

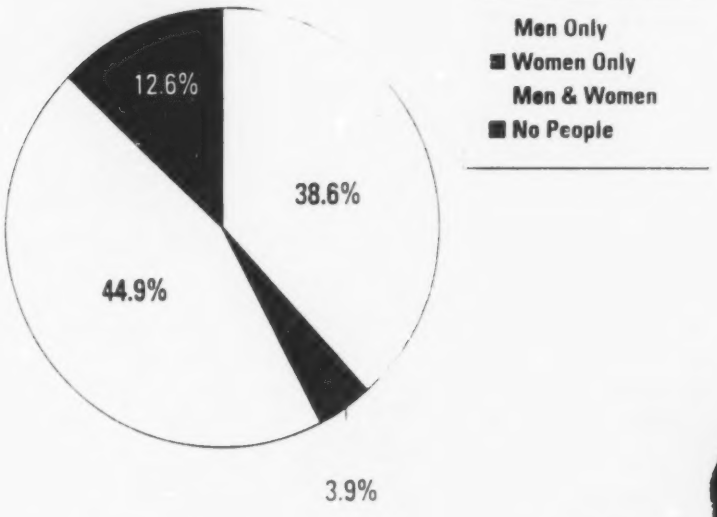
- Over half of all the commercials recorded feature only White people (52.2%). Removing from the pool commercials that do not show any people at all (91 commercials), the proportion of White-only advertisements rises to 59.7%.

- People of color almost never appear in commercials unless the commercial also has White people in it ("multi-racial" commercials). Out of 722 commercials, only 28 feature African Americans by themselves, only 3 feature Latinos by themselves (all on NFL programming), and only 2 feature Asian Pacific Americans by themselves.

- While "multi-racial" commercials may constitute a significant proportion of a program's advertising (32.7% of NBA, 32% of Wrestling), people of color are often relegated to minor roles, literally in the "background" of scenes that feature White people. For example, a Wendy's restaurant commercial shown during MLB and NFL games features several White patrons enjoying their meals and talking with the White owner. In the background, an African American man walks by quickly

Gender

Gender Composition of Sports Programming Commercials (1999)



In sports programming that boys consume, the relative invisibility of women magnifies the importance of the female images that do appear. Although women are more visible in the commercials than in the programs themselves, the frequency and quality of representation raises concerns.

Women rarely appear without men in the sports programming commercials in the sample.

- While 44.2% of the commercials with people feature only men, 4.4% feature only women.
- Nearly every one of the 91 commercials that portray no people has a male voice-over. Including these commercials pushes the percentage of male-only advertisements to over 50%.

- **Women often appear in stereotypical and/or background roles.**

  - The images of women as sexual objects, prizes, and supportive props for men's success in sports programming are reinforced by the commercials that play during the games. **On average, a sports programming viewer watching shows and commercials will see these images twice an hour.**

  - In commercials that feature both women and men, women are often cast as beautiful and sexual rewards for men who purchase the right product. A typical storyline involves the transformation of a formerly nerdy or insecure man who is now adored and desired by beautiful women. For example, a Keystone Light Beer commercial shown on ESPN *SportsCenter* features a nerdy White guy who drinks bitter beer and repulses women. After the character drinks Keystone Light, he is surrounded by two beautiful young women and proclaims, "I hope my wife's not watching!"

Accordingly, some women are also cast as "controlling," "emotional" wives and girlfriends who must be rejected in favor of beautiful, sexy women. In a Sony PlayStation spot shown on Extreme Sports and during NBA games, a male is shown with a female watching a romantic film. The male is then ridiculed and taunted by cartoon characters for being "whipped," watching a "chick flick," and doomed to domestic chores. At the end of the commercial, the female is harassed by a cartoon clown and locked out of the room, while the male is playing a video game and accompanied by a big-breasted cartoon woman.

Self-Images

"[On Extreme Sports] they had kids going out and most were breaking their wrists and arms. That has a huge influence on what kids do."

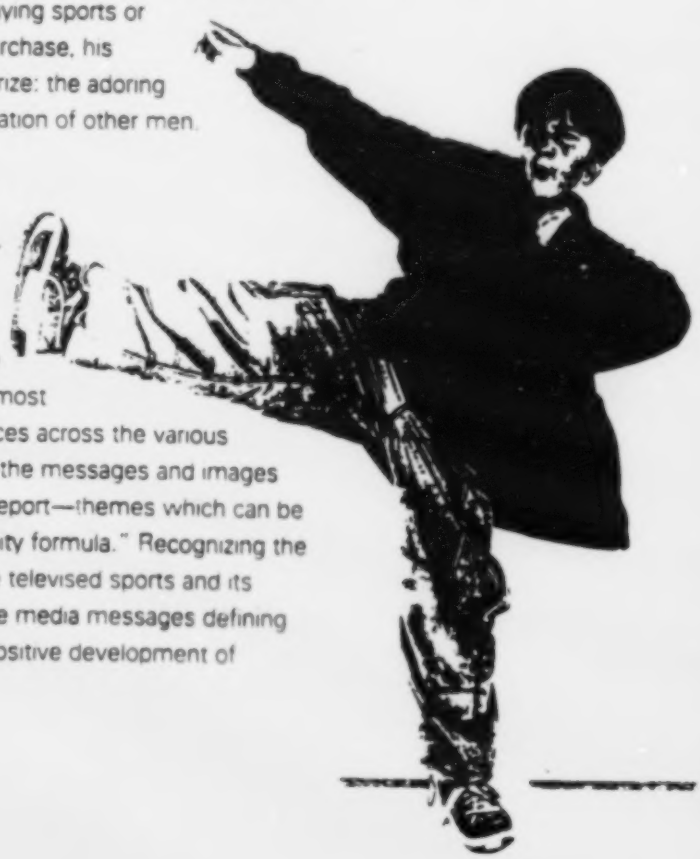
- **Many sports programming commercials that boys watch play on male insecurities about being "man" enough.**
  A common formula in commercials is to play on the insecurities of the audience, convincing them that purchasing a particular product will help them overcome their fears, embarrassments, and shortcomings. In sports programming, many of the commercials play on male fears of being a geek or a nerd who is not cool, aggressive, or attractive to women. Commercials for products such as Rogaine (hair loss) feature formerly insecure, unattractive men who acquire confidence and success after using the product.

- **Traditionally masculine images of speed, danger, and aggression are often used in the sports programming commercials that boys watch.**
  Echoing the images that pervade sports programming, commercials often employ storylines that emphasize speed, danger, or aggressive behavior to attract viewers to their products. For example, 27% of the commercials on Extreme Sports place actors in such situations.

Conclusion

Ninety percent of our nation's boys regularly or often watch televised sports programs, with their accompanying commercial advertisements. What messages do boys and young men receive from these programs and ads? What values and ideas about gender, race, aggression, and violence are being promoted? How do these messages and images define what it takes to be a "real" man?

According to the sports programming that boys consume most, a real man is strong, tough, aggressive, and above all, a winner in what is still a man's world. To be a winner, he must be willing to compromise his own long-term health by showing guts in the face of danger, by fighting other men when necessary, and by "playing hurt" when he's injured. He must avoid being soft; he must be the aggressor, both on the "battlefields" of sports and in his consumption choices. Whether he is playing sports or making choices about which products to purchase, his aggressiveness will win him the ultimate prize: the adoring attention of beautiful women and the admiration of other men.



These messages are promoted, in varying degrees, in the NFL games, NBA games, MLB games, Extreme Sports, *SportsCenter* shows and in their accompanying commercials. In the dramatic spectacle of Professional Wrestling, these messages are most clear, presented to audiences as an almost seamless package. While there are differences across the various types of sports programs and commercials, the messages and images reinforce dominant themes outlined in this report—themes which can be summarized as a "televised sports masculinity formula." Recognizing the extraordinary number of boys who consume televised sports and its exceptional power to influence, more diverse media messages defining masculinity could powerfully influence the positive development of **boys to men**.

Methodology

Commissioned by Children Now, this study of sports programming consumed by boys was conducted by Michael A. Messner, Ph.D.; Darnell Hunt, Ph.D.; and Michele Dunbar, M.A., from the Department of Sociology at the University of Southern California. The study is based on a sample set of programming that aired during the week of May 23-29, 1999, including the following: two broadcasts of ESPN's *SportsCenter*; two broadcasts of Extreme Sports (one on ESPN, one on Fox Sports West); two broadcasts of Professional Wrestling (TNT's *Monday Night Nitro* and USA's *WWF Superstars*); two broadcasts of the National Basketball Association (NBA) playoff games (one on TNT and one on NBC); and one broadcast of Major League Baseball (MLB) on TBS. The sample set also included two broadcasts of the National Football League's (NFL) *Monday Night Football* on ABC from the previous football season (San Francisco 49ers vs. Detroit Lions, December 14, 1998; Miami Dolphins vs. New England Patriots, November 13, 1998).

This study involved a quantitative and qualitative textual analysis of sports programming and the accompanying commercials. After an initial review of the data, the research team established a preliminary coding system of concepts and categories (e.g., patterns of violence and aggression, images of diversity). The entire sample set was then reviewed by a researcher and analyzed systematically according to the preliminary coding system. A secondary coding system emerged from this review and was used in a second independent review by a different researcher. Subsequently, a final qualitative/quantitative coding system was developed. Concurrently, a separate quantitative coding system was developed for the examination of commercials. Following the initial phases of data collection, analyses of each separate sport were compared to identify common themes and patterns. Notably, data collected from the dramatic pseudo-sport of Professional Wrestling proved considerably different from all other data; thus, direct comparisons with Professional Wrestling were performed only when appropriate.

Further, this study also incorporates findings from the following research conducted by Lake Snell Perry & Associates: (i) a national poll of 1,200 children ages 10-17 (conducted between June 15-28, 1999), and (ii) two focus groups of boys (conducted on May 10, 1999). The poll sample of children included 300 interviews from each of the following racial groups: White, African American, Latino, and Asian Pacific American. Each of these four base samples was then broken down by gender—200 boys and 100 girls within each sample—and weighted so that each of these demographic groups reflects their actual representation in the national population of children. The data overall were also weighted by age to ensure an accurate reflection of the population. The poll has a margin of error of +/- 5.7 percent. The two focus groups, conducted in Secaucus, New Jersey, were organized by age (boys ages 12-14 and 15-17) and each group included participants of different races. .

After consulting extensively with the advocacy and academic communities, we decided to focus our research on the four largest racial and ethnic groups in the United States: White, African American, Latino, and Asian Pacific American. We recognize that these four are certainly not the only minorities found in the United States, but for the purposes of this study we have limited our focus solely to these groups. As race terminology is constantly evolving, this report uses terms most likely to be used by that particular racial group.

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